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What We Learned From Taking a New Writing Class: Perspectives on Learning and Empathy for 1L Students

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Last fall, we independently decided to register for new writing classes to challenge ourselves, expand our writing skills, and regain insight into the beginner’s mindset that our 1L students adopt as they learn legal research and writing. We both expected more growth than challenge. After all, we are experienced lawyers and legal writing professors, and we see every day that learning a new writing discipline requires patience, persistence, openness to new ideas, and the ability not to take setbacks too personally. How difficult could this be at this stage of our careers?

Well, in short, it was more challenging than we could have imagined! In this essay, we provide some brief background on the writing classes we took, describe some of the

¹ This article relates to Prof. Rylander’s prior experience teaching at American University Washington College of Law.

particular challenges we experienced, and offer some lessons learned that we hope may remind us, and influence others, to tap back into greater empathy for the daunting journey our 1L students face as novice legal writers.

Playwriting (Elizabeth Keith): I have been teaching 1L legal writing for over 20 years and have been active in local community theater productions for even longer. I have taken several undergraduate-level performing arts courses over the past several years (utilizing American University’s generous tuition remission benefit)—including Advanced Scene Study, Shakespeare, Voice, On-Camera Acting, and Moving Body—to sharpen my actor’s toolbox. Last fall, I decided to switch gears from theater performance-based classes and enrolled in a Playwriting course.

The class met once a week for three hours, and I joined a welcoming and eager group of undergraduate students excited to explore the craft of playwriting. Over the course of the semester, we would create two short plays²: a “personal” play, based upon something from our own lived experience, and a “research” play that could be based on anything as long as we did appropriate research to set and support the play, the subject matter, and its characters. Our homework each week was to write and revise our plays, and then we used class time to share our work in front of our professor and peers, who provided live critique.

Since I had been reading and performing in plays for a long time, I was well aware of the basic structure and format, as well as the importance of setting, plot, and character development. However, creating something new and sharing that early work product with a group of fellow students was more daunting than I had expected and exposed vulnerabilities that I thought I had outgrown.

Writing Climate Witness (Elizabeth Rylander): I have taught 1L legal writing for four years. In my free time, I have studied photography off and on for about 15 years, and I enjoy reading about science and nature. An online workshop called “Writing Climate Witness” seemed like a good opportunity to try writing nonfiction that aligned with these interests. The workshop met for eight two-hour sessions, and participants were strongly urged, but not required, to share draft work for group feedback.

Over the first few weeks, my classmates submitted a huge array of material for review and critique: short stories, essays, memoirs, and part of a book chapter. I appreciated people’s comfort with writing a bit and then adding it to our submission queue for

² A “short play” under our syllabus was defined as a play of approximately 10 pages that, when performed, is roughly 10 minutes in length.

review. I didn't have any writing in progress at the time (a rookie mistake), but I figured that I could catch up quickly.

Unfortunately, I did not spend enough time deciding *how* to catch up, and I did not block off time to write for class; I thought I would write when I felt like it. That decision (another rookie mistake) did not afford the writing process sufficient space or focus, and the results were predictable—lots of short passages that contained some useful ideas but needed more structured effort. When students struggle with time management, I send them to the Office of Academic Excellence for support, and they always report back that the counselors helped them to organize their schedules into a manageable format. But until I struggled to find time to write myself, I never thought to ask what the counselors advise students about this issue.

EK: One of the first challenges I encountered was that playwriting required extremely focused, thoughtful, and precise dialogue crafting. An early (and valid) criticism I received was that my characters were too “expository,” meaning that they conveyed *too* clearly how they were feeling, what they were thinking, and why. However, the best plays allow the actors to develop and create a backstory and character objectives in each scene, so trying to convey a story only through scene-setting and dialogue, with maybe a few director's notes, presented a significant challenge. This is the opposite of what we try to teach our students when explaining case law in a memorandum or brief—convey both the context *and* facts so the reader can understand the case *without* needing to fill in any blanks. This was the first of many “a-ha moments” I had in considering how my legal training might impact my ability to write in a different genre.

ER: I couldn't make my character expository enough! I chose one of our instructor's writing prompts—a reflection on a “more-than-human” encounter from my past—and endeavored to write about a time that an enormous sea turtle floated up from beneath me during an otherwise frightening moment on a snorkeling trip. I could visualize the scene clearly: the warm sun, the rough water, the turtle's extraordinary calmness. But, after starting the reflection over and over, at different times of day and in different styles, and finding that I could not convey much of anything, I concluded that this incident just wasn't workshop material.

Several weeks went by while I tried to make something of this prompt. And, against the advice I give students every week of the year, I didn't ask the instructor for help. I didn't know what questions I would ask or what kinds of answers I hoped for. I figured that I would work it out on my own eventually.

EK: A few things did come more easily for me than for some of my peers based upon the skills and habits that I have developed as a lawyer and now endeavor to teach in my 1L legal writing classes. For example, I respected the importance of appropriately formatting the script from the very beginning rather than waiting until later drafts. Some may call this a procrastination technique, but to me, formatting a document is like ironing: it leaves me instantly gratified that I'm making some progress on the task at hand. I can also appreciate choosing the correct tone for my audience. While the audience for a play is certainly broader than it is for a legal document, selecting the appropriate tone and language style for my characters was critical for establishing a realistic play set in a particular time period. Character development required careful consideration of the person's economic and social background, family dynamics, culture, relationship to other characters in the play, and geographic location. It also requires creating an objective—what does the character want and how will he/she try to get it? Being sensitive to those considerations certainly made me a more thoughtful writer.

In addition to selecting appropriate tone and language, I am also familiar with the power of a clear storytelling arc. I also take great pride in my ability to write concisely; so, once I overcame the “expository” speeches that my early characters were giving (also a rookie mistake), I was able to relax into the power of intentional word choice just as I teach in legal writing. And, finally, I am familiar with staying within page limits or word counts for a document. As lawyers, we have an acute awareness of the length and depth of our writing in relation to court rules on page limitations or word counts. We make strategic choices in documents that are subject to page limits that require us to focus on our strongest or dispositive arguments first; raise one or two viable counterpoints rather than ten; and select the “best” cases to present and support our analysis. Similarly, in a short play, you need to narrow down the most impactful moments of the characters' lives and choose appropriate obstacles in order to get to the resolution you want at the end.

ER: Narrowing focus and choosing a format that required intentional word choice helped me, too. When I found myself in need of a reboot, I looked through some old photos and found inspiration in a snapshot of a small lizard standing on my foot as though it was at a scenic overlook. I wondered what the lizard could see from there.

Advocates must understand and convey background and factual detail effectively; telling the story of a case can be very challenging. We must consider both how our client sees a situation and how other parties might present it to a judicial audience. I

have worked with students on overlapping timelines, clashing perspectives, and situations in which it just isn't clear what a particular fact signifies. In those cases, decisions about which facts to include in a document, and how to juxtapose them, help to convey our view of what's going on in a case.

Considering a lizard's-eye view of the world turned into a short poem about perspective. I considered how a beach might look through the eyes of three different animals: a crab (looking up), the lizard (looking out), and terns fishing in the surf (looking down). I gave the poem some structure and a couple of motifs, and I was relieved to find that the familiar challenge of fitting words into a specific space produced results quickly. I then submitted the poem for workshop feedback and spent a lot of time offering, in lawyerly fashion, the disclaimer that I am not a poet.

It took me seven weeks to produce 172 words for review.

EK: While writing the personal short play was slightly easier for me (because I was able to draw from my childhood memories and real people in my life), the research play — the one I thought I would be “better” at as a lawyer accustomed to research — was a different story. While I enjoyed doing the research and selecting the relevant time period, characters, setting, and conflict, the creative part was much more difficult. The personal play already had some validation in my mind as an event that was formative to who I am as a person; but, constant doubt clouded my writing of the research play. Was I getting the language right? Was this even interesting? Who would care if I wrote this, and who would come see it performed? Was it interesting to anyone other than me? Were there enough characters? Too many characters? Is this conflict resolved appropriately? Did I develop my characters enough for actors to succeed on stage in telling the story I wanted to tell?

These are all questions that our 1L students grapple with on a daily basis in our legal writing courses, just in a different context. Students come to office hours and sometimes are genuinely surprised when I compliment them on a particular draft or suggest that they need to keep revising because they aren't quite there yet. I, like my 1L students, had lost any familiarity with the writing structures I knew had worked for me in the past; now, I was in a murky, new world, trying to make an effective writing that reflected all of my prior skills, training, and successes.

So, what did I do to help with this? I admit (and am genuinely embarrassed to do so) that I ran an early draft of my research play through generative AI. And, as with anything that AI produces, it helped somewhat with tone, possible storylines, and

format, but it also generated characters who were inappropriate to include for the specific time period and the story I wanted to tell. In short, it was not the panacea that I (or, I imagine, most of our students) had wished for. In the end, I continued slogging through the revision process, relying on my own creative writing and research skills. Unfortunately, with the semester nearing an end and grading obligations for my 1L legal writing classes kicking into high gear, I never got my research play to a point where I was ever happy with it. Another important lesson—writers are always constrained by time *and* competing obligations, so procrastinating and last-minute “panic writing” are *never* winning strategies when building a new writing discipline. Similar to planning time to write, allowing time to revise is a critical step towards developing a strong and sustainable writing practice.

After we had a chance to reflect on our experiences as writing students, we took away five conclusions for ourselves as 1L legal writing professors. We hope that they will inform our teaching going forward, and we share them so that they might help yours, too.

1. In expecting more growth than challenge in our workshops, we missed the point of taking workshops at all. As we remind students weekly, learning new writing skills is intensely challenging—and growth lies in embracing that challenge. Decades of writing experience didn’t change that. Writing taps into a different part of us—one that is curious, easily frustrated, sensitive, and delicate. It’s easy to get in our own way. As a result, we will use our experience as students to reassure 1Ls that these feelings are normal and relatable and that discomfort (and sometimes frustration!) is an essential part of the growth process.
2. Empathize with the extremely stressful and high-stakes environment in which our students are learning new writing skills. In our zero-stakes situations, we could shrug it off when our writing did not go to plan. There was no grade at the end of the course and nothing in our professional careers depended on the skills we were learning. But our students, particularly over the academic year, were not only anxious about the transition to law school and learning new foundational skills that will prepare them for practice—they experienced the

added pressure of accelerated hiring timelines by big law firms that trickled down to other organizations as well. Students started networking in the fall, and applications opened up for their 1L and 2L summers before many had even received their first semester final grades! This is an unprecedented maelstrom in which to learn such a fundamental skill as 1L legal writing.³

3. Following the accepted writing structure and formatting rules demonstrates baseline competence and respect for the audience. We stress this over and over in our 1L legal writing classes, and yet students sometimes ignore or underestimate the importance of properly organizing and presenting a document the way the reader expects. In court, even the most deeply researched and well-written brief can be rejected for not using the correct font or cover color; in practice, incorrectly formatted documents will provoke some level of distrust of the document before the content is even read.
4. Office hours are necessarily limited, so we typically advise students to come prepared with specific questions to maximize their use of time. That works well for students who are engaged in the writing process, but it won't do much for students who are suffering from blank-page syndrome or who need help with broad conceptual items. At a minimum, we can make sure students know that if they struggle to get out of the starting block (or even to find the starting block), "I'm stuck" is great office-hours material—and that speaking up may be far more efficient than trying to figure things out on their own.
5. Understand when and why students may be tempted to substitute generative AI for their own analysis and writing, and try to head that off at the pass. Students tend to resort to generative AI when they are unsure of the assignment's parameters, the professor's expectations, or simply lack confidence in what they are doing. One of our many teaching goals in 1L legal writing continues to be serving as trusted resources for 1L students to approach both inside and outside of the classroom. In cultivating a welcoming and supportive rapport with

³ See LSAC & NALP Special Knowledge Report, *2025 1L Class: Student Awareness and Impact of Big Law Recruitment* (2026), <https://www.lsac.org/sites/default/files/research/LSAC-NALP-Report-1L-2025-BigLaw-Recruitment-v6-ACC.pdf>; Jamie R. Abrams, *Big Law's Manufactured 'Arms Race' for Talent Recruitment Harms Us All*, ABA J. (June 18, 2025), https://www.abajournal.com/voice/article/big-laws-manufactured-arms-race-for-talent-recruitment-harms-us-all#google_vignette.

students, they will be less likely to seek assistance from other, less reliable sources and learn to develop and trust their own legal and writing instincts. Growth will not happen as effectively or as quickly if students resort to using short-cuts like generative AI that will undermine their own understanding of how to effectively analyze and communicate legal reasoning, which is a process more than a product.